

Knowledge exchange as a participatory research tool: Alcohol and other drugs in social work practice

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Background and purpose: While social workers regularly encounter people who are affected by alcohol and drug use, the paucity of education and training for social workers in this area remains. The aim of this three stranded study was to bring together perspectives on the nature of training provision for social workers on working with alcohol and drug use from; the practitioners themselves; social work educators; and employer-based workforce development leads. Methods: As part of the research process a Knowledge Exchange event, with a selection of participants from each of the three strands of the project, was held to ensure the outputs of the study reflected the perspectives of all potential beneficiaries of the research. More than 50 people took an active part in discussing not only the findings from three surveys, but also solutions to some of the challenges and barriers the findings raised. Qualitative analysis was used to examine notes written up from the day. Results: A range of reflections were raised on the availability, nature and extent of training on alcohol and drugs for social work practitioners. Particular attention was paid to organisational barriers which limit training availability or the time practitioners have to attend. Social work practitioners, social work educators and workforce development leads also shared their own experiences about what they do to overcome some of the challenges and barriers raised. Conclusions and implications: The knowledge exchange event played a key role in the final analysis of each research strand, the suggested 'solutions' or 'ways forward' and nature of the research outputs. Taken together this work provides a powerful evidence base from which to target capacity building activities aimed at improving the skills of social workers and highlights implications for wider social care education, policy and practice.

Keywords: Alcohol; Drugs; Education and training; Knowledge exchange